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Overtures

by Louis Henderson

Sat 21 Apr - Sun 10 Jun. Part of ¡Viva! 2018

Introduction



HOME presents a major new co-commission and solo exhibition from award-winning artist Louis Henderson, who has produced a series of works based around a collaboration in the Haitian city of Port-au-Prince.

The narration takes place between two locations; France and Haiti - where a ghost story unfolds about the history of the Haitian revolution. In 1791, the slaves and the freed people of colour in the colony of Saint-Domingue rose up against the French. In the process they abolished slavery on the island and established the first free black state in the Americas with the Haitian constitution of 1804.

Somewhat obscured and ignored throughout history, considered minor to the revolutions of the USA and France, the Haitian Revolution was perhaps the only revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries to truly live up to the Enlightenment ideals of the universal human rights of freedom and equality.

The Revolution was initially led by a former slave who became an army general: François-Dominique Toussaint Louverture (20 May 1743 - 7 April 1803), also known as Toussaint L'Ouverture. He was arrested by

Napoleon Bonaparte's army in 1802 and brought to France, imprisoned in a medieval castle in the Jura Mountains where he died from pneumonia and malnutrition in April 1803.

The exhibition has been conceived as an expansion of the research for a feature film, staged through four rooms that include archival displays, a sound installation and four films. *Overtures* takes the viewer on a journey from the National Archives in France, to the frozen stratigraphic landscapes of the French Jura and into the heart of a baroque-like limestone cave, through rivers and waterfalls into the sea that connects these two worlds, eventually arriving in Haiti, where we come across a group of young actors rehearsing scenes from a Creole translation of the play *Monsieur Toussaint* by Édouard Glissant.

A new HOME co-commission in partnership with Spectre Productions, Centre national des arts plastiques and Ghetto Biennial 2017.



Room 1. *I build my language with rocks*

An installation consisting of three archival cabinets with a collage of material relating to a manuscript of the memoirs of Toussaint Louverture. Louverture wrote these documents from inside his prison cell, eventually he was banned from writing by the French state but insisted on continuing as a form of resistance to political oppression. After his death the memoirs were found hidden, folded into a handkerchief wrapped around his head. Today they are held in the French National Archives in Saint-Denis. This manuscript is a time capsule that contains a rare example of a French language slave narrative (written by a former slave) in which the crystallisation of French and West African Gbe languages such as Ewe and Fon can be identified as the beginnings of Kreyòl Ayisyen - the official language of Haiti.

Also included is a short video documentation of the *Monsieur Toussaint Workshop* - a five day collective translation of Édouard Glissant's 1961 play *Monsieur Toussaint*. Sections of the play were translated from French to Haitian Creole with a group of eight young Haitians at the Centre D'Art, Haiti in July 2017.



Room 2. *Bring breath to the death of rocks*

Travelling from the documents in the French National Archives to the prison cell in the Jura mountains in which the manuscript was written, this introductory film suggests an archaeology of the colonial history of France buried within its landscapes and institutions.

Many millions of years ago the Jura was a tropical ocean, as it metamorphosed into the mountain range it is today it left behind large sedimented layers of time, forming the strata that fold along the horizon line today. If strati-*graphy* means the *writing* of strata, this film suggests a reading of strata in which the fossilised history of Louverture can be brought to life through a form of geologic haunting. Narrated with fragments of Louverture's letters, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* by Aimé Césaire and a passage from the opera *Orfeo* by Claudio Monteverdi, the film turns to baroque, epic and tragic aesthetic forms as a way to speak of the escape and eventual journey of Louverture's ghost through water, rock and human bodies.



Room 3. *These lowest depths, these deeps*

A six-channel sound installation developed in collaboration with the artist João Polido Gomes. Using field recordings from the Jura and Haiti and processed archival sounds, a sonic landscape is woven together with a video projection that imagines the journey made by the ghost of Louverture from the waterfalls of the Jura, through the rivers of France eventually into the Atlantic Ocean and across-away towards the Caribbean Sea. Understood as a space in between two worlds, room three transitions from the material supports of rock and celluloid film to a digital liquid environment. This movement also implies a transformation between different states of being for the ghost. The sea is understood as the medium for the transmission and transformation of history, language and culture and as the dividing line between the world of the dead and the world of the living. Here the viewer is introduced to fragments of poems written by members of the collective, *The Living and the Dead Ensemble*.



Room 4. *We stand our mouths open under the sun*

Moving between culturally and historically important post-revolutionary landscapes in Haiti and scenes of a collective of young actors rehearsing a play in Haiti's capital of Port-au-Prince, the closing film in the exhibition focuses on the relation between errancy, collectivity and ciné-marronage (a form of cinema that flees an oppressive centre into a peripheral sphere).

The film walks with an unnamed character, who transports the ghost of Louverture through Haiti's countryside towards the city where he comes across rehearsals of a creolised translation of *Monsieur Toussaint*. The character has returned to his home country after years away and slowly falls into place within contemporary Haitian society, becoming part of a collective consciousness. Haiti's past and future are discussed through entirely improvised scenes and through the words of Glissant's play which are transformed through the bodies of Haiti's youth. The ghosts of the past are brought to life in the bodies of the present as a way to form a collective resistance for future struggles, *The Living and the Dead Ensemble*.



The Living and the Dead Ensemble

Created in Port-au-Prince in November 2017, *The Living and the Dead Ensemble* is a collective of 11 artists from Haiti, France and the UK. The collective first gathered for the Monsieur Toussaint Sessions workshop at the Centre d'art in Port-au-Prince July 2017, working together on translating the play *Monsieur Toussaint* by Édouard Glissant from French to Haitian Kreyol and from 1961 to 2017. Focusing on theatre, cinema, poetry, song, slam and rap, the collective first performed the Kreyol version of *Monsieur Toussaint* in the cemetery of Port-au-Prince as part of the Ghetto Biennale 2017. Currently they are working on a new film that will take place in the outskirts of Port-au-Prince focusing on Maroon heritages in Haiti and the relation to secret societies in Haitian Vaudou. *The Living and the Dead Ensemble* is Atchasou, Léonard Jean Baptiste, Mackenson Bijou, Rossi Jacques Casimir, Dieuvella Cherestal, James Desiris, James Fleurissant, Louis Henderson, Cynthia Maignan, Olivier Marboeuf and Zakh Turin.

“We’re trying to decompose and recompose the play, to Creolize the language it’s written in”

Journalist Rob Sharp writes on the background and inspiration behind *Overtures*...

Two men, Haitian actors Rossi Casimir and Léonard Jean Baptiste, rap lines from Martiniquan writer Édouard Glissant’s 1961 play *Monsieur Toussaint*, the story of the final days of François-Dominique Toussaint Louverture, one of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution, the 1791 slave rebellion that led to Haitian independence.

The duo, along with six other Haitian actors, translated *Monsieur Toussaint* at Port-au-Prince’s Centre d’Art last summer ahead of a live performance in Haiti late last year. Louis Henderson conceived this project with producing partner Olivier Marboeuf, intercut filmed footage of it, its rehearsals, and shots of locations in Haiti, for film work seen at HOME Manchester. Decisions over the film were made as a group.

In rehearsals, the two actors noted that Dessalines, a former slave, was shown by Glissant as speaking in French – the language of the country’s colonial rulers – so infused his part with Creole. In doing so the two men made this famous

historical work comprehensible to most locals – the vast majority of whom speak only Creole – for the first time.

“Most people in Haiti are illiterate and the country’s history is in a language that doesn’t speak to people,” Casimir says. “It’s more than a barrier, it’s a zombification”.

Henderson’s film hopes to unpick the complex relationship between Haiti’s national heroes, their language, and the country’s history. French is seen as the mother tongue of an educated minority, but will be linked to pre-revolutionary colonial rule and historical power inequalities that still persist.

“French represents the colonial master’s language,” says Henderson. “We’re trying to decompose and recompose the play, to Creolize the language it’s written in. We’re trying to reposition people’s roles in that power dynamic, via the comprehension delivered by the power of language.”

This is an edited and updated version of an article that appeared on frieze.com on 5 December 2017.

About the artist

Louis Henderson (b. Norwich, 1983) is a filmmaker who lives and works between the UK and France. Through his films he attempts to find new ways of working with people to address and question our current global condition defined by racist capitalism and ever-present histories of the European colonial project.

A graduate of London College of Communication and Le Fresnoy – studio national des arts contemporains, Henderson also completed a research degree at the European School of Visual Arts, France. His work explores the possibility of an archaeological cinema, investigating political histories embedded within landscape and institutional archives. In recent years his work has moved towards a materialist reading of the digital and the space of the Internet as an archival/archaeological site within which resistance to capitalism and social control can be excavated and engendered.

Henderson has shown his work at venues including the Rotterdam International Film Festival, CPH:DOX (Copenhagen International Documentary Festival), The New York Film Festival, Tate Britain and The Contour Biennial.

About the curator

Sarah Perks is Artistic Director: Visual Art at HOME and Professor of Visual Art at Manchester School of Art. Sarah is an award-winning writer, curator and film producer interested in cross art form curation and practice, politically engaged contemporary visual art and counteracting the toxic narratives of our time.

Credits

Room 1: *I build my language with rocks*

was initially commissioned by Akademie der Kunst Berlin for the exhibition *Tell it to the Stones. The Work of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub* curated by Annett Busch and Tobias Hering, 2017. Filmed on location at the Centre d'Art Port-au-Prince and Atis Rezistans. Special thanks to: Judith Michel, Leah Gordon and André Eugène.

Room 2: *Bring breath to the death of rocks*

Actor: Jephthé Carmil. Producer: Olivier Marboeuf. Associate Producer: Cédric Walter. Assistant Producer: Jeremy Rossi. Director of Photography: Diana Vidrascu. Sound Recordist: André Fevre. Filmed on location in the Archives Nationales de France and the Chateau de Joux February 2018. Special thanks to: Laurene Mansuy (Chateau de Joux) and Anne Rousseau (Archives Nationales)

Room 3: *These lowest depths, these deeps*

Text: The Living and the Dead Ensemble. Sound: João Polido Gomes. 3D images: Phil Cuxac

Room 4: *We stand our mouths open under the sun*

Written and directed by: The Living and the Dead Ensemble. Producer: Olivier Marboeuf. Associate Producer: Cédric Walter. Camera Assistant: Pierre Adler. Sound Recordist: Roudie Rigaud Marcelin. Sound Editing: Jules Wysocki. Filmed on location at the old *Domaine Idéal*, headquarters of the Vaudou Kingdom of Haiti. Special thanks to His Highness Augustin Saint Clou, King of the Danti Kingdom, Haiti

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